

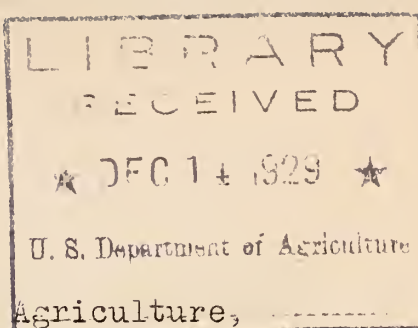
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IS THE HOUSEWIFE WORTH HER SALT?

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"I met Mr. Brown today," Nell Alden told her husband one evening, "and he says I can have my job back if I want it."

"Hmm." Ed Alden glanced up from his paper with a troubled look in his eye. "Thinking of taking it?"

"I've half a mind to. He'll give me the same salary I was getting when I left--two thousand. Half of that would pay for a maid with some to spare, and--"

"Don't you fool yourself," her husband interrupted. "A girl costs double her wages if you allow for the extra food and breakage. What's the idea?"

"Well, I've been doing a little figuring. Looking after this house--the meals, the cleaning, and washing and ironing--takes me twenty-seven hours a week. That's only four hours a day. I could get a girl for ten dollars a week--"

"Yes," Ed broke in again, "and then do all the work over yourself. You know you'd never be satisfied with the way she'd do things. Why, you can hire only the poorest sort of help for ten dollars."

"Now wait a minute," his wife went on. "I don't mean full-time help. I can get the girl that Mrs. Page had, the one who was so good. She used to get fifteen dollars a week--that's as much as any of them get for general housework--but she wants only part-time work now. She'd come in and get breakfast, and then go home again for a few hours; she lives near enough. We'd both be away for lunch, and she'd do the cleaning and laundry in the afternoons while cooking dinner. It would take her only about five hours a day--she works almost as fast as I do--and she'd come for ten dollars a week."

"And the food bills, and so on?"

"Well, from what Mrs. Page and some of the other women tell me, the bills go up only six dollars a week or thereabouts with the better class of workers. Sixteen dollars a week would cover it all--say nine hundred dollars a year, to be on the safe side."

"You seem to have it all doped out," her husband admitted. "But then there're your lunches and carfare. And your clothes would cost more, going to the office everyday."

"I've counted that all up, too." Nell's voice was eager. "The carfare and lunches would amount to about three dollars a week, say one hundred and fifty dollars a year. And my clothes would add another one hundred and fifty. I'd have to buy them ready-made or hire a seamstress. That would come to about eighty-five dollars a year, I figure, with all the sewing I do, and sixty-five dollars more would cover the extra things for the office. Let's see, that makes three hundred dollars--twelve hundred a year in all, counting the maid. We'd have eight hundred dollars a year clear."

"Yes, and you'd use that up before the year was over in doctors' bills and the like. You'd get all worn out, Nell, running a job and keeping up this house too. You'd be tired out before you left for the office in the morning, telling the maid just what to do, planning the meals, and so on. And you'd be coming home and fussing around, helping with the dinner and fixing things up. It takes a more easy-going housekeeper than you to get much help out of a hired girl."

"Well, of all things." Nell's face was flushed. "You know perfectly well that you're the fussy one in this household. I'd be easy-going enough if it weren't for what you expect. If everything isn't just so-- And that's all the appreciation I get--"

"Now, now, Nellie, I didn't mean it that way." Ed had been married for over a year, and was gaining in wisdom. "Of course I appreciate what you do. That's just what troubles me. I know you'd wear yourself out trying to have everything as nice as ever. You remember how Mrs. Morris looked the other evening?"

"Yes, I must say she's gotten awfully thin since she started working," Nell granted, calming down. "I do wish I could get a part-time job. But there's just none to be had. It's hard enough to get a full-time one, if you're a married woman."

"But why get a job at all?" her husband asked. "Can't you find enough to do here, with the garden and your flowers, and sewing, and so on? I thought you were going to put up a lot of canned stuff, and reupholster those old chairs?"

"Mercy, that isn't enough to keep me busy all year," Nell replied. "I do all the sewing now that's worth doing at home, and it doesn't average much more than two hours a week--I checked it up the other day. And I've spent only fifty or sixty hours this year in canning, making jelly, and so on. It didn't pay to do some of that, either."

"Didn't pay? What do you mean?"

"Well, do you know how much my time was worth, canning those cherries? Just about nine cents an hour."

"Oh, come now, how do you figure that?"

"I've got a record of it. I paid four dollars for the cherries--at the wholesale market, too; and the sugar, jar rubbers, and gas come to thirty-nine cents. I could have bought the same amount of the best brand of canned cherries for four seventy-five. Thirty-six cents difference for four solid hours of labor."

"But that's no fair comparison."

"Why not? The quality of mine is somewhat better, but we could get along with a commercial brand perfectly well. And if I hadn't had empty jars on hand my time wouldn't have been worth a cent."

"But you don't mean to tell me that you don't save anything doing things at home?"

"Oh, with some things, yes. I saved almost twenty dollars on that green silk dress, and sixteen dollars on the black one. That's about one dollar and twenty cents an hour."

"What?" her husband exclaimed.

"Well, making them both took me thirty-six hours, including buying the goods and everything, and I'd have spent about three hours shopping for each of them if I'd bought them ready-made. That makes thirty hours for saving thirty-six dollars."

"My word, but you're becoming statistical! But see here--that's a higher rate than you'd get with Brown. What do you want with a mere two thousand a year?"

"Silly! I can't spend all my time making myself silk dresses. They're my best-paying line. I wouldn't save anything to speak of if I made your shirts, for instance."

"Good heavens, you're not thinking of doing that?"

"Well, you were wondering why I couldn't keep busy. The sewing I have done this year, besides making my dresses, was only worth about forty cents an hour, on the average."

"But that's nothing to sniff at," Ed assured her.

"Thanks, awfully!" Nell laughed. "How'd you like to spend your time earning half of what you can make at the office, and not getting any pay check at that?"

"But why all this to-do about earning money? You'd think I didn't make enough to keep the wolf from the door. I'm not exactly in the high income brackets yet, I admit, but--"

"Oh, it isn't the extra money, Ed. It's having enough to do and feeling I'm getting somewhere."

"But I thought you liked keeping house. You used to say--"

"Well, I do--some parts of it. But it's so much the same thing over and over, washing dishes, peeling potatoes. It was all right while I was learning how, but when I think of going on year after year, and no chance of advancement, nothing to work up to, nobody even thinking you've got a job at all--"

"Not got a job? Why, everyone knows there's no more important and valuable--"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Ed, don't say it, don't say it! I can't stand any more of it!"

"Why, what in the world?"

"All this talk you men get off about Home and Mother. I'm sick of it! If you really meant it you wouldn't be saying in the next breath that you support your wives. You'd realize that their work is worth something, too, even if it isn't paid. Besides, I'm not talking about being a wife and mother. I'm talking about being a housewife. It makes me mad the way you men take it for granted that just because we're women we're perfectly contented staying at home, doing housework that you can hire done for twenty-five cents an hour. To hear you in your flowery moments, you'd think we spent most of our time uplifting the souls of our husbands and children. But you know perfectly well that it's mostly routine, manual labor--and you'd walk a mile to get out of doing five minutes of it."

"Good heavens, Nellie! I'd no idea-- Why, I never thought you-- But it wouldn't do any good if I did wash the dishes, would it? You say you haven't enough work to keep you busy as it is. What do you want me to do? Pay you a salary?"

"Well, I don't see why not."

"What? Wages for wives, eh? Some little feminist you're getting to be."

"Feminist nothing," Nell asserted. "It's just common sense. If I didn't do the housekeeping you'd have to pay someone else to do it, wouldn't you? Why shouldn't you pay me?"

"But I've been living under the impression that I did make some small contribution toward your living expenses."

"Now, Ed, I'm serious," his wife protested.

"Well, seriously, Nell, I don't get you. You know that everything I have is yours. And you figured out yourself how much you need for your allowance."

"But that's just it. I don't want an allowance. That implies that the money's yours, and you give me some of it, instead of its being mine that I've earned myself."

"Sounds like a difference in name to me. I'm perfectly agreeable, though, to calling it a salary--provided I don't forget."

"But it's not just a matter of name," Nell insisted. "It's a matter of principle. A salary would be based on what my services are worth, not on what the living expenses come to."

"Hmm--." Ed reflected a moment. Then with a gleam in his eye, "All right, let's try it that way. Let's see--how much did you figure that maid would cost? Nine hundred dollars?"

"But that's just for the housework. There's the management too, and the mending and sewing."

"All right, how much for them?" Ed took out his pencil.

"Well, planning meals and marketing and buying things for the house takes about three hours a week. What do you think it's worth, assuming we could hire someone to do it? A dollar an hour?"

"Easily in your case," her husband granted. "That's three dollars a week--one hundred and fifty a year for management."

"Then there's about eighty-five dollars for sewing, and say twenty a year for canning. And mending about an hour a week, at say forty cents--that's another twenty dollars."

"Wait a minute," Ed interrupted. "That sewing is almost all for yourself. Is it fair to count that in?"

"Well, if I didn't make my clothes, they'd cost just that much more, and you'd have to pay for them, wouldn't you?"

"Check. Let's see." Ed consulted his figures. "That gives us a total of eleven hundred and seventy-five dollars. Anything more?"

"We ought to add something, it seems to me, for the difference between the quality of my cooking and the maid's. And for a caterer's bills, too--we'd have to hire one now and then. And I looked after you last winter when you were sick, instead of having a nurse. Oh, yes, and I painted the kitchen."

"Hold on, now. We'll let the dead past lie. I don't intend to repeat that grippe, and if you ever do any painting again! I don't know how you'd figure those items. Would a hundred dollars a year cover them? Or two hundred? Suppose we say two twenty-five. That brings us up to fourteen hundred a year. How's that?"

"All right, I guess." Nell's voice was a bit doubtful.

"Not so bad, is it, for a part-time job? I wouldn't have guessed it. Well, there's your salary. Now what?"

"Why, you pay it to me, by the month. And I pay my half of the joint expense, and keep the rest to use as I want, for clothes and so on."

"You're really serious?" Ed asked. "Well, I'm an old-fashioned man. Far be it from me to take advantage of a woman. May I point out that this up-to-date system of domestic financing leaves me holding one thousand dollars more than you do? My modest income, you know, is thirty-eight hundred."

"Yes, I was just thinking of that," Nell replied. "We really ought to figure on what I can earn in an outside job--that position with Mr. Brown, for example."

"Not a bit of it," her husband broke in, laughing. "You can't swap principles like that. Why, suppose you'd been a Hollywood star before we were married? Or, for that matter, suppose you'd never had a job at all! No, sir! If I'm to pay you a salary, it's got to be for housekeeping services rendered to me, here and now."

"But it's really not fair," Nell protested. "Why should I be penalized because housework happens to be a poorly paid occupation, when I could earn more at something else?"

"This is the first time I've heard a housewife complain that servants are poorly paid!" Ed murmured.

"Besides," his wife continued, ignoring the remark, "if we lived in New York City we'd have to pay more than nine hundred dollars for a maid. And is it fair to limit me to a part-time salary, when I'd prefer to have a full-time job. That's one of the troubles with housekeeping. First you haven't enough to do, and then, when you've several small children and need to take it easy, you have to work night and day. Why, Alice must put in seventy hours a week, looking after her house and those children. If she took an outside job she'd have to have a full-time maid just to do the housework, and a first-class nurse for the children. She couldn't hire anyone who'd work as long and as fast as she does. They'd easily cost her twenty-five hundred a year, and even then there'd be a lot left for her to do."

"Yes, I suppose she 'saves' John about three thousand a year at present," Ed replied. "But don't you see, Nell, that this principle of yours is all off? That's as much as John makes a year. What's he supposed to do? Pay it all to her because she 'earns' it? How does he get paid for his own work, then?"

"But he could pay her half of what he earns, couldn't he? Divide according to their relative earnings?"

"Ha!" Ed exploded. "See where that's leading you? On that basis you'd get even less than your fourteen hundred. And how about a few years from now, when I'm making fifty thousand a year--and you're doing nothing but bossing the servants? Why, you couldn't even pay for your hats with what you'd get. You've a fine little scheme there for breaking up the home. There's no getting around it--if people live together they've got to share the income on a fifty-fifty basis. You see that yourself; that's what you keep coming back to, without realizing you're doing it."

Nell sat up in amazement. "Fifty-fifty basis? But we don't have that arrangement now."

"Don't have it?" "Why not?"

"Why, all I get is an allowance for my clothes and carfare and so on, and you keep everything that's left, aside from the housekeeping expenses."

"But what's left is merely my allowance, isn't it? Aside from the insurance and savings, and they're yours as much as mine."

"Really Ed, I don't see that. It's not a fixed amount for you. And none of the savings are really mine. I could spend my whole life keeping house and not have a cent at the end--except what the law would require you to give me."

"So that's your view of our future, is it?" Ed asked her, laughing. "But really, Nell, what other arrangement could we have?"

"Couldn't we pay for the housekeeping and other joint expenses, and then divide what's left, and you use your share as you want and I do the same?"

"Whew! That's an idea! Give me a minute to get used to it." Ed chewed his pencil a bit. "And I take it we'd let the life insurance go hang?" he asked, glancing up.

"No, not necessarily. We could count that in with the joint expenses."

"But just how do you justify my carrying insurance, if you get your half of the surplus right along?"

"I don't suppose it is fair--as far as I am concerned. But it's a good way to save in case we have children, isn't it? I suppose we ought to do some saving jointly."

"Seems so to my old-fashioned mind," Ed laughed. "And how about that property Dad left me? I'd deed half of it to you?"

Nell considered a moment. "No, that should still be yours, it seems to me. It's only the savings while we're married that ought to be divided."

"Sort of a business partnership, eh? Dividing the profits? Well, it sounds reasonable enough. But suppose I need money for the office, or for some new business? That would come out of my half, I take it?"

"Couldn't you put that aside before we divided the surplus? We wouldn't necessarily divide it equally, anyway. If you had extra expenses we could allow for them. The important thing is having money of your own, that's recognized as yours, and that you can spend as you want--or save. That's why I think I'd like to take that outside job."

"See here," Ed proposed, after a moment's reflection. "This scheme sounds fair enough. Why don't we try it for a while, with things as they are, and you tell Brown you don't want that job?"

"Well," his wife said sweetly, "I suppose we might."